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DE RUEHDM #1297 0821443
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 231443Z MAR 06
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7879
INFO RUEHXX/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD 0713

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 001297

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LONDON FOR TSOU, PARIS FOR ZEYA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/21/2016

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: KURDS TURN OUT EN MASSE TO PARTY-SPONSORED NOW RUZ
CELEBRATIONS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4(b)/(d)
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1. (C) SUMMARY: Thousands of Syrian Kurds turned out across Syria on March 21 to celebrate the ancient holiday of Now Ruz, the solar new year. Kurdish political parties organized festivals throughout Syria, combining folk dancing and Kurdish pop music with easily digestible political messages. Although SARG security presence was heavy, thousands of Kurdish families from an array of socioeconomic backgrounds attended organized events in Kurdish strongholds. The only reports of clashes with the SARG come from Aleppo, where Kurdish sources claim 150-200 Kurds were arrested on March 20 while ringing in the new year. The festivals underlined the level of Kurdish organizational effectiveness and demonstrated the real, tangible potential for mass Kurdish political action, painting a stark contrast to recent Arab opposition-organized events. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) Syrian Kurds celebrated the ancient holiday of Now Ruz marking the start of spring and the beginning of the solar year. Ringing in the vernal equinox on the evening of March 20, celebrations continued on March 21, coinciding with the Syrian public holiday of Mother's Day. According to Luqman Ois, an Azadi Party and human rights activist, Hafez al-Asad officially designated March 21 as a public holiday in 1987, following Kurdish demonstrations in 1986, succeeding in giving Kurds a public holiday without having to call it a Kurdish holiday.

3. (C) Folk festivals were held throughout Kurdish strongholds in Syria, including three different sites in Damascus, as well as in Aleppo, Qamishli, and Amuda. Poloff attended one festival in the Damascene Tishreen district, where tens of thousands of Kurds gathered in a park to celebrate. The celebration's infrastructure was impressive, particularly by Syrian standards, featuring concession stands, at least three entertainment stages with good sound systems, and VIP tents. The festival was organized and sponsored by three Kurdish political parties, identified by Ois as the Yekiti Party, Azadi Party, and Unity Party. Each party managed the program for one stage, featuring a variety of teenage and twentysomething musicians, folk dancers, pop singers, and dramatic pantomimes. Many in the crowd, made up in large part of young families and youth, carried scarves and wore hats in the Kurdish national colors of yellow, green, and red, with many young women also wearing traditional Kurdish dresses. Poloff watched one dramatic presentation, in which a group of twenty young adults pantomimed the torture of four young Kurdish men, ending with a group of young women carrying the injured offstage and the body of one dead "martyr" carried by his comrades. On another stage, a pop singer sang of "Kurdistan" while folk dancers entertained the crowd. Meanwhile, multigenerational

families of various socioeconomic backgrounds picnicked around the festival area. Streams of revelers entered and exited the festival site, as traffic police officers watched and directed traffic.

¶4. (C) Poloff observed a heavy security presence near two of the festival sites in Damascus, where police officers were lined up near the entrance of the festival with buses full of other officers stationed nearby. Only a few officers were visibly equipped with riot gear. However, inside the festival, there was no visible police presence. In a press release, the Kurdish Committee for Human Rights reported arrests in Aleppo on the night of March 20, as revelers rang in the New Year. Ois cited reports from contacts in Aleppo that 150-200 Kurds had been arrested; however, these figures have not been confirmed by other human rights organizations.

¶5. (C) COMMENT: The Now Ruz celebration in the Tishreen district was an impressive, well-organized event, resembling in many ways municipally-organized festivals in the U.S. or Europe. The organizers demonstrated a high level of political sophistication and an understanding of how to package their political agenda in entertainment for the consumption of a young, vibrant audience. Particularly surprising is that the authorities even allowed this agitprop-laden folk festival to take place, considering it was organized by three of the most radical Kurdish opposition political parties. While the Kurdish opposition may exaggerate the number of their official party members, their ability to mobilize the street is indeed a real, tangible capability that seems to have earned, at least on this day, SARG respect.
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